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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 000154

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS TWO PRESIDENTIAL CONTENDERS

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Classified By: Ambassador John Campbell for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary  
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¶1. (C) The Ambassador met earlier this week with Governor Attahiru Bafarawa of Sokoto and Governor Orji Kalu of Abia. Both governors are contesting for the presidency in 2007 on the tickets of smaller political parties. Both expressed continued optimism about their chances of success in April, despite competition from the mainline PDP and ANPP parties.

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Governor Bafarawa  
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¶2. (C) The Ambassador met Governor Attahiru Bafarawa of Sokoto State on January 21. Governor Bafarawa talked about his presidential campaign, claiming he has substantial support from Christians and youth in northern Nigeria. Bafarawa is an important regional leader who claims credit for installing the new Sultan of Sokoto and expressed his thanks for U.S. recognition of Northern Nigeria's cultural heritage.

¶3. (C) Bafarawa discussed his presidential campaign. He was nominated for the presidency under the banner of the Democratic People's Party (DPP) in December 2006. In terms of a base of support, he says that he is the most popular candidate among the Christian minority in northern Nigeria and that he has active support from the youth in the North. He believes Atiku's campaign will collapse under the weight of criminal charges and that Buhari will face resistance in the South due to his perceived militant Islam. The Governor hopes to use those factors to become the consensus Northern opposition candidate to Yar'adua and the PDP. He said he will formally launch his campaign in Kaduna on January 24 in Kaduna, the historic northern capital. He will then travel to Enugu, Ibadan, Port Harcourt, and Lagos.

¶4. (C) Governor Bafarawa expressed a lively interest in mission outreach efforts focused on preserving and digitizing ancient Islamic manuscripts and expressed support for our efforts. He said he was responsible for renovating the Arewa House, the center at Amadu Bello University being used for research and documentation of the ancient Islamic texts.

¶5. (C) Bafarawa is an important regional leader in the Northwest. He says he was responsible for selecting the new

Sultan of Sokoto and was insistent that he would determine the date on which the new Sultan will be turbaned. He is an intelligent political operator who has built substantial wealth in oil, property, and commodities. The Governor is 52 years old and is more youthful and energetic than many of the other "northern elders." He is well connected to other prominent northern political leaders.

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Governor Kalu  
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16. (C) Ambassador and Poloff met January 22 with Orji Kalu, Governor of Abia state and People's Progressive Alliance (PPA) candidate for President. Governor Kalu insisted that religion and ethnicity will be decisive factors in the 2007 presidential race and that because of this, that there will be far less rigging. Governor Kalu was optimistic about his own candidacy, claiming that since his main rivals are Northern Muslims (Yar'Adua, Buhari, Atiku, Bafarawa) Islamic support will be splintered. Kalu says that he has the backing of Ohaneze Ndigbo, a pan-Igbo cultural organization, and that he is now the "consensus Igbo candidate." He claims to have solid support in the whole of the south as well as among Christians in the north. Kalu believes his Christian, southern base will propel him into Aso Rock.

17. (C) Kalu said he intends to replace his current running mate, Mariya Baba, before the February 13 INEC deadline because some Nigerians, especially in the north, will not accept a woman on the ticket. Kalu approached Governor Bafarawa of Sokoto and asked him to run as the PPA Vice President, but Bafarawa declined, saying that he would rather run for President himself and lose. Kalu indicated that he continues to seek a running mate from the North. Kalu said that he would report to INEC headquarters on January 23 to take part in INEC's controversial verification exercise.

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Governor Kalu thinks that in conducting verification of candidate credentials, INEC has overstepped its mandate and that the exercise is "illegal," but he said he personally had no fear of being disqualified. He noted that "everyone knows that the INEC screening is only about disqualifying Atiku."

18. (C) Kalu's comments were routine about possible solutions to Niger Delta unrest. He noted the need for development and jobs, and promised to hold a "stakeholders meeting" with local residents, oil companies, foreign diplomats, and other interested parties. He said that unlike the current administration, however, his government would follow-through and implement policies recommended by the stakeholders. The Governor also made it clear that his administration would be a good friend and ally to the United States would do more than rival candidates to emulate U.S. economic policies. He emphasized Nigeria's need to create a middle class for sustained economic growth. Kalu noted that his wife and children are US citizens and that he is a green card holder.

19. (C) Governor Kalu also talked about his unhappiness with the recently released National Population Census results for Abia state. Kalu contends that the population figure published for Abia of 2.8 million residents grossly underestimates the true population. He explained that for the purpose of imposing a state property tax, the Abia state government recently looked at satellite imagery of the town of Aba and counted 1.7 million dwellings. According to the governor, some of these buildings are multi-story flats with an average of eight families in residence. He does not understand how the census can show only 2.8 million residents in all of Abia state, when he believes there are several times that number just living in Abia town.

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Comment  
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¶10. (C) COMMENT: Neither Bafarawa nor Kalu likely will be leading candidates for the presidency in 2007. However, Bafarawa is well connected in the North, and we believe he will be an important player in determining who eventually emerges as the consensus northern opposition candidate. One possibility is that his presidential campaign is a surrogate for former head of state Ibrahim Babangida (IBB). IBB and Bafarawa are close political allies, and IBB has considered running under the DPP platform. Governor Kalu's point about splintering the northern vote is interesting, but he overestimates his own ability to draw the southern vote. Some southerners and Christians will certainly vote for Buhari, given his grassroots popularity, and Yar'Adua will benefit nationwide from the PDP machine. It is by no means certain that all Igbos will support Kalu, as Pat Utomi also claims to be the Igbo candidate and there is often friction between Igbos and other southerners. END COMMENT.  
CAMPBELL